

## **The Strangest Purge by OrangeLovePerson**

**Category:** Stranger Things, 2016

**Genre:** Friendship, Romance

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Eleven/Jane H., Mike W.

**Pairings:** Mike W./Eleven/Jane H.

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2018-11-06 12:39:20

**Updated:** 2018-11-06 12:39:20

**Packaged:** 2019-12-12 23:02:47

**Rating:** K+

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 8,086

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

**Summary:** „Calm down, Mike.", Nancy had said, earlier, when she'd seen his expression. „No one ever really purges in Hawkins. You know that." (AU in which 16-year-old Mike Wheeler finds himself having the coolest Purge night ever. Very fluffy and sort of silly. One-shot.)

## **The Strangest Purge**

A.N.: Hey! :) So, I actually wanted to post this on Halloween, but then I got caught up in party preparations and didn't really have time left for any proof-reading on this :/ ^^ Anyway, I hope you like this little AU. Happy Stranger Things Day, everyone! :D

### **The Strangest Purge**

The hand of Mike Wheeler's watch clicked closer and closer to eleven 'o' clock. The trees outside their house were shaking in the upcoming storm.

Usually, Mike would have been sort of tired by now – High school was tough, and combined with the side job Mike had taken a couple months ago – working a few hours at Radio shack, every Thursday and Friday after school – Mike rarely had the energy to stay up late on Fridays.

Saturdays were different, when his friends would come over, and when they either spend hours on end playing D&D or visited the arcade, often staying out until after midnight. But Fridays were usually quieter, calmer, for Mike.

Not this Friday night, though. Because tonight was the night of the purge.

Mike had never really bothered all that much, had never felt threatened by the annual "holiday". The Wheelers earned well enough to be equipped with a pretty good security system: Motion detectors and automatic metal barricades protected all windows and doors on first floor. The additional barb wire, that shot out of the picket fence surrounding their property as soon as the clock struck nine, on purge night, also provided some safety.

But, mostly, Mike didn't feel scared of the purge because it had never really struck anyone he knew. None of the houses in their neighborhood had ever been attacked by purgers, except for Mrs. Gordon's house, and she had been fast asleep while they stole some money and left again.

Mike knew that people died during the purge, every year: That murder and violence and so much other terrible stuff happened to people, without any legal consequences whatsoever. He'd always found it to be stupid – a ridiculous, terrible way to deal with some people's darkest impulses, but he also knew that quite a lot of citizens were in favor of this law, and that, at least for now, he alone would not be able to change that.

So, usually, Mike tried to ignore the purge as much as possible. As long as his three best friends were fine, too, Mike would not care all that much about the festivities. Will, who always went to the town hall with his mom and brother, would probably be the safest of them all. Lucas, who spend his purge nights locked into the basement with his sister Erica, while their mom and dad upstairs kept watch (- just in case -) had also never been hurt during the purge. And Dustin's house was always surrounded by about a thousand mouse traps, during purge night. So he'd probably be safe again, too.

But, still, there was a corner of Mike's mind that couldn't stop pondering about the worst possible outcomes this night could have for himself and his family. Becuase this year's purge was different. This year, his dad was in trouble.

Ted Wheeler had gotten into some sort of financial problem with several of his business partners, recently... And, according to what Mike had overheard from his mom's phone calls to her friends, these business partners were pretty furious about how things had turned out for them... Ted Wheeler, despite his usually calm and rather desinterested ways, had really gotten himself into a troublesome, bureaucratic fight with those people.

So, yeah, for the first time in Mike's life, he knew that someone might actually have a bone to pick with his family, during the night of the purge. And this realization made Mike feel absolutely uneasy.

„Calm down, Mike.“, Nancy had said, earlier, when she'd seen his expression. She'd rolled her eyes, completely underwhelmed by their current situation. „No one ever really purges in Hawkins. You know that.“

Yes, rationally, Mike knew that. But something about this year felt

different, somehow... He couldn't put a finger on why he had this terrible feeling in his gut, this instinct, that told him they needed to take everything more seriously. He just was in this weird mood, and it had lingered for two hours, already. It had started right when his Dad had activated the security system, minutes before the alarm rang throughout Hawkins, announcing the beginning of the darkest night of the year.

Maybe it was time to check in on the others, on Will, Lucas and Dustin.

Or, and this next thought had Mike's heart racing a little in his chest, a silly grin slipping onto his features, maybe it was time to try and talk to *her*.

So Mike crawled into the blanket fort in his basement, a watchful eye clinging to the door to the garden for a couple of seconds, until he could fully relax. He pulled his walkie out from the secret hiding spot, and arranged it to the one frequency he knew the others rarely ever used.

„Hey, El?“, he asked, quietly. „Hey, it's me, it's Mike.“

The walkie sizzled, quietly. And then, he heard her voice, timid and soft.

„Hi, Mike.“

And his anxiety melted away, right then.

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He didn't actually know her, though.

Like, there was still a small corner of Mike's mind that wondered, sometimes, whether she was even actually real. Because everything about her, from her silent, warm voice to the questions she asked and the way she would listen to even his most ridiculous rambles, was actually too good to be true.

*And, she was a girl.* Girls usually didn't talk much to Mike.

Well, she didn't talk much either, oh no. She was so quiet, for the

most part, and she clearly still struggled with her vocabulary quite a bit. Mike didn't know what exactly had happened to her, back when she was little, but it must have been something very strange, judging by the way even the most normal words often confused her.

But she liked him. He knew she did, because why else would she keep spending all this time with him, on the walkie, every couple days?

He'd never seen her, but Mike often felt like she had to be very, very close, - and not just because the walkie was working so well, when he talked to her, either. She *felt* close to him, as if her physical presence was something only Mike could notice. It was almost like her gaze was boring into his own, from across the room, when he talked to her on his walkie. And sometimes, it seemed like she brushed her fingertips against his, without actually doing so.

She seemed... lost. And yet so certain of herself, in other ways. She was both lonely and grateful, too. Grateful when Mike explained things to her, talked to her... She must have had a very strange childhood, wherever that had been. Mike wanted to know everything about her, but she often held back, and he didn't want to be too intrusive. So he barely knew anything about her at all. When he'd noticed her, that one time – noticed her quiet hiccup from the otherwise empty walkie frequency, a little over two years ago, he'd become curious.

„Hello?“, he'd asked, carefully, and then she'd gone quiet again.

„Hello?“, he'd asked again, intrigued at the idea of other kids in their area using walkie talkies to communicate, too.

„Hello.“, she'd replied, in a voice that was so small and shy that he felt the need to ask who she was, if she needed help, perhaps... She sounded like she might.

„Hey, uhm, this is Mike? Over.“

No reply had come back. He'd cleared his throat.

„So, uhm, do I know you?“, he'd asked, trying to sound as friendly

and normal as possible... He could tell that the person on the other end was listening.

But El had still felt unsure about talking to him. It was quiet for another two or three minutes, before she finally spoke.

„No.“, she'd said, and was there a little bit of sadness in her voice? Mike had frowned.

„Oh, well, then, it's nice to meet you, anyway!“

Another silence.

„Can you tell me your name?“, he'd asked, curious. No answer followed.

Just, when he'd become certain that she wouldn't answer any more, he'd heard her voice again, through the walkie.

„E-El.“, she'd said, and he'd smiled at the unusual sound.

„El? That's your name?“, he'd asked, hoping he didn't sound rude. It was a beautiful name, actually.

„Yes.“

„Hi, El.“, he'd greeted her, and he'd heard her breathing change, a little bit. As if she was making up her mind, right then.

„Hi, Mike.“

He'd laughed at the monotone way she'd said that, and then, in reply, he'd heard her laugh for the first time, too.

It would be many weeks till he found out more about her, like her (even stranger) *full* first name, or the fact that she lived in a secret spot that she couldn't tell him about, ever. Or about how much she loved Eggo waffles, and how much she despised thunderstorms.

But this laugh right then, this tiny, happy sound he'd heard her utter, on that very first night he'd talked to her, that had been Mike Wheeler's first glance at who this strange, mysterious girl out there

was. And he never smiles brighter than when he hears it.

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Tonight, his fingers were twitching all the time. He was nervous, she could tell. And not in the nice way either, when she'd said something that made his cheeks flush bright red and his thumb scratched over his neck, bashfully.

Oh no. Mike was scared, tonight. He tried not to let it show in his voice, but his effort was of no use. He might not be entirely aware of this, but El could read him like a book, by now. Even just through the walkie, she could. Well, at least most of the time.

„Mike?“, she asked, once he'd told her about some of the things he'd done in school today, with his three best friends. He'd started to look thoughtful again, deep in thought. „Mike, are you afraid of the purge?“

He breathed a little too sharply, right then, so even if El didn't have the ability to watch him with her powers, - seeing his eyes widen slightly, his nostrils twitch - she'd still have heard in his voice how agitated Mike really was.

„I... uhm, yeah. I kind of am.“, he admitted, looking a little embarrassed, but sticking to the truth, nonetheless. Friends don't lie, El remembered. It was one of those things Mike liked to say, and now she liked to say it, too. Friends don't lie, and Mike was the best friend anyone could ever ask for.

„Why?“

He sighed. „Because my Dad got into some trouble this year, El. At his work. And now I just... I just feel weird about the whole purge thing, this year.“

She frowned, remembering what Hop had told her, earlier. *No one ever purges in Hawkins.*

„Don't worry, Mike.“, she said, silently. „It will be fine.“

He sighed, the sound tickling her where she pressed the device against her ear. El often wondered whether Mike would be okay with

the way she was secretly watching him... How he'd react to *all* of her. Her powers, her appearance, her past... Mike barely knew anything of the truth. He asked so many questions that she mostly avoided answering, and she could tell how badly he wanted to finally meet her, already... And maybe he would, one day. But there was also so much fear in her gut. Fear of breaking Hop's rules, after he'd spend so much time caring for her and protecting her. Fear of someone seeing her, if she ever left the cabin in the first place. Fear of what Mike would think and say, if he ever noticed just how much of a weirdo she was.

Was that the right word? She'd sometimes heard it on television, or even from him, and it seemed like just the right word to describe her shortcomings. El wasn't like normal people. She needed more words, more information of the real world. She could barely voice her thoughts to Mike, sometimes, and while it might become easier to communicate with him once they were face-to-face, El also feared what he'd say if he did meet her. Maybe her powers would scare him, like they had scared Hopper at first. Or maybe Mike wouldn't *like* what he saw, once they met... El knew from television that there were a lot of pretty girls in High schools, and Mike went to a high school *every single day*. Maybe El looked nothing like all the other girls Mike knew. Maybe she wasn't pretty enough for someone like Mike.

Even now that El's hair had grown out a little, she often wondered if she could ever become like the girls on television. Pretty, yes, but also eloquent and free and safe to be around. Because El didn't feel any of those things, sometimes. She wanted to talk at a normal speed, and never have to ask what a word meant. She wanted to go trick or treating on Halloween, and to have Birthdays and picnics and swim in a lake in summer. She wanted to go out in the open world again, not trapped in the confines of their small wooden cabin any longer. She wanted to see Mike, and not care about the fears that held her back. She wanted to take risks, now that the terrible lab she'd grown up in had finally closed, last year. She wanted to finally meet her mom and her aunt, even though Hop had told her that things were difficult, and that her mom might not even remember El anymore. Mostly, El wanted to feel like life was going on, like she wasn't trapped anymore.



„Soon.“, Hop liked to say. „Soon things will change for us, El. Just... Keep studying. Then we might be able to get you into High school, next summer. Wouldn't that be nice, huh?“

Yes, it would be nice, El agreed... But that was still months and months away, and if she was being entirely honest with herself, El wasn't sure if she truly believed Hop when he said that. He was scared about her, and for a good reason... But, even if he did say the truth, and even if he really planned to finally let El go to High school, in a couple months... That was still so, so many days away. And sometimes, when El heard Mike's sweet voice rumble in her ear, late at night, when Hop was once again out on a late night shift, El would feel such a strong longing for the boy at the other end of the walkie frequency. In another life, if things were easier... She'd be with him right now, in that beautiful little blanket fort.

She'd touch his hands, his palms wide and warm against her own fingers... And she'd trace each freckle on his cheeks with the tip of her nose. She'd hug him a million times over, and she'd press a kiss to his lips whenever he'd smile at her like that.

Whenever he smiled at her like he was right now.

Could he feel her presence, somehow? El often wondered how he managed to meet her eyes, so precisely, even though she knew he couldn't see her when they talked like this.

„I just wish the purge was already over, you know? So that we all could relax again, for another year.“, Mike said, shrugging.

El nodded. Yes, it was a weird festival, the purge.

Even here, hidden in the deepest forest, in a cabin almost no one knew existed, El felt a little uneasy. Hop had left to protect people in the town hall: It was an annual tradition here in Hawkins, as it was in many other small towns, too, to let everyone who didn't feel safe in their own home stay in the big building, protected by several police officers. Sure, there was always the risk of people purging, anyway, but most citizens trusted the police officers enough to believe that they wouldn't take part in the festivities, and the citizens themselves all had to leave any sort of weapon behind, in order to be allowed

entry into the town hall. It was a good system, or so it seemed. Hopper liked to make sure that everyone was safe, here in town. Or, that they *felt* safe, at least. No one could guarantee anything...

„Hey El?“, Mike said, and she could see concern cross his features. „You are safe, though, aren't you? I mean, you're always hiding, anyway, and no one can find you?“

It was a bit as if he'd been reading her thoughts, or something. She smiled at his worried expression, feeling her insides warm up at how much he cared.

„Yes, Mike. I'm safe.“

He breathed out a laugh, rolling his eyes at how relieved he sounded. El giggled, silently. „Okay, that's... that's good, El. I'm really happy you're safe.“

„And you're safe, too, Mike.“, she told him, because Hopper had said nothing really bad would happen in Hawkins, this year, and why on earth would anyone ever want to hurt Mike?

Of course, El also knew that there were some pretty bad people out there. Even though she wanted so much to believe that all the Bad Men had died during the fire in the lab, two years ago now, she still often felt haunted when she remembered how hard it had been to flee. She'd had to run, using her powers to open all sorts of funnels and finally crawling through tubes that had almost made her suffocate with how small and thin they were, even for a skinny, fourteen year-old girl.

No, escaping the lab had not been easy... And she'd felt scared afterwards, scared that they'd find her, and capture her again, and that next time, there would be no running away from the Bad Men. From Papa, who must be so angry at her, so furious at how she just left.

But El wouldn't think about all of that anymore, oh no. She was safe. The lab was gone and empty, the bad people had disappeared from Hawkins. Papa might be dead, for all El knew.

And the purge had nothing to do with any of that, either. Why would El fear the purge? Those bad people didn't obey any laws, anyway. If they were still out there, and if they knew where she was, then El was in big danger, anyway. A murder-night would not change anything, when it came to the people from the lab. Any day was full of danger with these people.

Mike sighed, ripping El out of the dark, scary thoughts once more.

„Hey, El? I know you think it's not safe, but... Do you think I'll ever be able to meet you? Just to talk to you in person, for once?"

She noticed how her shoulders tensed: A deep insecurity settling in her stomach, while butterflies clawed at her heart all the same. She was nervous and exhilarated and terrified and overcome with joy, like every time he asked her that.

„I hope so, Mike.", she mumbled, realizing for the millionth time how true it was, despite all her worries.

„Cool.", he said, smiling sweetly, and El's mouth split in a grin of her own.

„Cool.", she copied, noticing how his smile got just the tiniest bit wider.

Yes, she wanted to see him. She wanted to be more than just a friend that he talked to on his walkie sometimes, late at night... She wanted to be more than just a friend, anyway.

She wanted to belong to him.

And, even if she still felt scared about all the dangers that might lurk outside the cabin, and all the dangers that lurked around Mike's world, where she might not fit in and might not be what he expected, El knew that, in a way, she already *did* belong to him. And maybe he felt it, too, somehow.

She really hoped he did.

It was quarter past midnight when Mike heard it.

He'd fallen asleep in the blanket fort again, lulled into warm dreams by El's small, perfect voice. But something was off, Mike could feel it right away. Could feel how the air had shifted around him, invisibly.

The lights were all still burning low, deep yellow and orange hues clinging to the surfaces down here in the basement. But Mike didn't feel relieved to see those familiar, calming surroundings, still.

Because this calmness was deceptive.

He wasn't alone.

Someone was in the house.

How did he know that? He had no idea. But Mike could sense that his dark forebodings had been right, that something strange was going on upstairs. He could sense it in the same way as trapped animals can feel the hunter or butcher approaching, or like people feel the scariest moments in horror movies coming just by the unsettling silence that initiates them. Mike knew that something was very, very wrong, and for a second he considered reaching for his walkie and contacting El, telling her about his feeling of unease... But then he decided to not risk scaring her, he could be wrong about all of this, after all. There was no noise coming from upstairs. Maybe everything was alright. Maybe there was no reason to worry, whatsoever.

Mike tried to remember whether or not he had locked the basement door, but couldn't really find any comfort in deciding that he probably had... This wasn't just about him, after all. The idea of something happening to his parents, to Nancy or little Holly, was so much more terrifying than the idea of someone finding him down here...

Mike squinted his eyes, trying in vain to clear his thoughts and decide on what to do...

...when a rumbling noise from upstairs caused his blood to freeze in his veins.

It sounded like a table or chair had fallen over, or something. Afterwards, there was nothing but silence, once again.

Shit. This wasn't a good sign, was it? Mike felt the need to jump up and pace the room, getting his thoughts straight and some of that anxiety out of his system, but he felt like his limbs were nothing but a shivering mess, and he probably should try to be as quiet as possible, anyway.

What the hell was he supposed to do?

He had to go up there. He had to make sure everyone was okay. Maybe, the sound of him walking upstairs would be enough to scare the house-breakers away?

*Yeah, right*, Mike thought, almost rolling his eyes at himself despite the situation. *They'll take one look at you and know they have nothing to worry about. They'll probably take their guns out and shoot you right on the spot.*

Mike tried to not cause any of the old timber floor boards to creak under his steps, as he slowly climbed stair after stair. Then, he opened the basement door and peeked through the gap into their hallway.

The lights were off, the house was quiet. From the living room, a low, rumbling snoring rang quietly over to where Mike stood, and he could tell that it was the sound of his Dad sleeping on the LA-Z-boy once again. Nothing unusual about that... Everything okay up here, it seemed...

Mike heaved out a deep breath. What, so he'd been feeling shitlessly scared for nothing, these past ten minutes? Everyone was safe, everything calm and boring as usual?

Mike wanted to be sure. Wanted to check on Holly, and Nancy, and his mom.

He made his way up the stairs to the bedrooms, slowly and deliberately silent. When he stood in front of Nancy's room, he remembered that she sometimes kept her room locked, at night, and pleaded that that wouldn't be the case this time.

He turned the door handle, relieved when he saw the door crack

open slightly, a second later.

Nancy was okay. She was fast asleep, her covers tucked high around herself, and parts of her hair covering her calm features. Eased, Mike left the room again, before making his way over to Holly's bedroom.

She wasn't there, of course – Lately, his little sister spend most of her nights in their parents' bedroom again. And maybe, his mom had found that a night like the purge was an especially good reason to keep Holly close.

This door was actually locked, so perhaps Mike wasn't the only one in this household who'd had a bit of a bad gut feeling about tonight. Mike pressed an ear against the door's surface, trying to listen closely. The breathing from inside the room was soft, quiet, deep. His mom and little sister were probably fast asleep, their window too small for any intruders, to begin with.

That was good. Really good.

So good, in fact, that Mike felt slightly embarrassed at being so scared in the first place. Why had he thought that something would happen, that anyone could possibly find a way in, when their neighborhood, and especially their security system were so safe to begin with?

It was stupid. Tomorrow a new year until the next purge would begin, and tonight, everything was as normal as ever.

Or so Mike thought.

Until he opened his bedroom door, and noticed the girl that sat crossed-legged on his bed, eyeing him intently, and looking like she'd been waiting for him.

His heart must have stopped, right then. Because, one, how the heck had she come in here, and two, who was she?

Something about her was familiar, he knew. Her eyes burned into his, in the dark room... Dark and bright at once, a warm brown blinking through the pale blue shadows that came from outside. Her expression was absorbing, so curious and assured at the same time...

Her shoulder-length hair was curly, the ends of her honey-brown locks gently nudging against the hem of her bulky, green sweater. A small drop of blood hung over her lips, as if her nose had started bleeding a little while ago, without her noticing it or caring enough to wipe it away.

Oh, and she was pretty.

Like, really pretty. .

And she sat on Mike's bed, just like that... This odd stranger, a girl his age, a possible threat who somehow made Mike's heart clench in a weird, familiar way... sat on his bed, in the middle of purge night.

But, before Mike's brain had even fully realised what was happening, and before he could have been sure that what he was saying made any sense whatsoever, Mike found himself say the word that felt right, the word that jumped to the surface of confusing thoughts and nonsensical longing.

„El?“, he whispered, through the darkness, more a question than anything else, but deep down he knew it was her. It had to be her.

The tiny, surprised smile that build its way around her gasp might just have been the most awesome thing Mike had ever seen before in his life.

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A part of her had always wondered what it would be like to break the rules. *Again*, that was – she'd escaped Hawkins' lab already, after all, which certainly wasn't what Papa had wanted. But now El was following *Hopper's* rules, and his rules made sense and were meant to keep her safe.

Being trapped in a wooden cage with food and warmth and certain freedoms was so, so much better than being trapped in the lab. And Hop was so good to her, he cared for her like she was his own child.

El didn't want to disappoint Hop.

And yet she wondered, when she would finally go ahead and open the cabin door. El was scared of the consequences, and also scared of

never actually doing it.

It had been going on for too long, her time in the cabin. She wanted out, and if only for a night. If only to feel the wind on her skin once more, and to feel branches creak under the soles of her shoes.

El also wanted to see Mike though. Just one glance would be enough, just talking to him for a few minutes. Just to see how he'd react when he met her.

She missed him, it felt like she'd known him forever, and yet he didn't even know her face. El was so unsure of what to find behind the window of his bedroom. Would he be mad at her, for coming here at this time of night? Or would he be just as excited to finally meet her as she was to meet him? Would he quickly recognize her, once he heard her voice?

Eleven felt scared of the purge night, too. It was such a strange idea, the whole thing, but then again many things in El's life were confusing and complicated, and some of them she might never fully grasp. The purge was for killing, El knew, and for stealing and hurting others. All sorts of bad things could happen, during the purge, because people were allowed to break the rules, once a year.

Maybe she should break the rules, too. She could protect herself, after all. And she'd killed before, stolen before already. If El stepped out of the cabin and left the forest, she'd surely be able to find Mike's house within less than an hour. Mike had told her ages ago that he lived on a street called *Maple Street*, and she'd traced the patterns of the roads leading to his house about a million times on Hopper's old Hawkins map with her finger, ever since. Mike's house was the one closest to the giant power poles, she knew, and that Mike shared it with his parents and two sisters.

So, finally deciding that she'd rather risk all her safety, as well as Hop's trust in her, than not to be able to see Mike for many more months, perhaps, El reached for her thickest jumper and a warm hat. And then she left, crossing the cold forest and several small streets, avoiding every scary figure that she suspected in the distance. And, many minutes later, when fear and chilliness had almost impressed El enough to give up and turn back around, she finally saw the house



she'd been looking for.

It had to be his. She was almost certain that it was.

Now, all she'd have to do was figure out how to enter without being seen or causing a noise, in any way. And then, she'd look for Mike.

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Mike was still all flabbergasted, standing there in the doorway of his room, and it took him about half a minute to realise that he was currently still holding the door open.

He quickly stepped further into the room, not even really considering all the possible consequences of closing and locking it behind himself. Which then made him worry about making El uncomfortable, he didn't want her to feel like she was trapped with him, after all! Then again, he realised that walking around outside during purge night was very dangerous, and that she had probably faced much scarier things already than clumsy, blushing Mike Wheeler.

And *she'd* been the one to sneak into *his* room, after all. So maybe, if anything, *Mike* should feel scared of *her*. Which he absolutely didn't. No, if his heart wasn't racing with confusion and a little bit of worry, right now, Mike's face would probably be lit up with the goofiest grin ever, right about now. Because *El* was here. *What*.

„How did you...- Are you...- I mean...-“, Mike took a deep breath, trying to calm down before he made a complete fool out of himself. He never struggled so hard with forming sentences when it was just them talking over the walkie, damn it.

„You're really... here?“, he asked, hoping he didn't sound quite as much like a waistoid as he probably did. And what was he even *wearing*? An old, grey pajama shirt and slightly too wide sweatpants, while she looked so lovely in her soft green sweater and flap trousers. He still couldn't entirely believe it was her, that the girl he'd been talking to so often over the course of almost two years was sitting right in front of him right now, and that she was quite possibly the most beautiful girl in the universe. Okay, strike that. Not 'quite possibly', totally. It was dark in his room, shadows clinging to her features... But still, everything about her made him feel

overwhelmed, right now. What are you supposed to say, in these kind of situations?

She eyed him, almost a little amusedly, and nodded as an answer to his earlier question. „Yes.“, she said, breathily, softly, and *holy shit*, it actually was her! Even with the walkie frequencies fluctuating, from time to time, and with the fizzling of the electronic device itself, Mike was certain he'd recognize El's voice anywhere, any time. And now, to hear it in real life, less than four steps away from him and while she was sitting on his bed, made Mike's head spin a little.

He shuddered out a laugh. „Wow, that's... that's so cool.“, he commented, dumbly, but El smiled in response, and it was a tiny bit wider than the last time. Man, now he really wanted to make her smile like that again...

„How did you get here, El?“, he said, carefully approaching her slightly. He sat down on the floor about two feet away from her, so that, instead of looming over her from a distance, he was a little closer and also more on her eye level.

She looked down, almost looking a bit embarrassed, at the question.

„The window.“, she explained, pointing to her side, and Mike frowned slightly.

„But... how?“, he wondered, before noticing her look slightly uncomfortable again, and feeling stupid for even focusing so much on that, right now. He never wanted her to think that she wasn't welcome! Hell, if he'd have known she would come over, he probably wouldn't have been able to keep from smiling for at least a week. He'd wanted to meet her for so long now, she was the sort of mystery that you couldn't stop being fascinated by, and the sort of friend that always understood you, no matter what.

„I'm really glad you're here, El.“, he stated, trying to catch her gaze and quickly feeling his heart explode when she did. „I'm just surprised, is all.“

El nodded, seeming to get what he meant. „I wanted to meet you.“, she admitted, shyly.

Mike shoved a little closer to her from where he sat, on the floor, almost reaching for her hand before dropping the thought again, afraid that he was going too far, too quickly. He knew that El lived rather isolated, hiding somewhere away from almost any other people, so maybe he'd have to be very careful not to scare her, somehow.

„I've wanted to meet you, too, El! For like, ever.", Mike answered, still so excited by the fact that she was now here, in his room... looking at him..."I almost thought someone was breaking into the house, you know? I heard something, but... I'd never have thought that *you're* the one breaking in.", he told her, shaking his head.

„I wanted to break the rules, too.", El said, quietly. Her eyes were never leaving his face, it seemed, and his not hers. Mike had never really known what El looked like, always wondering, but never really feeling brave enough to ask. He didn't want her to think that it mattered so terribly much to him... And she hadn't known what he looked like either, after all. Or... had she?

„What rules do you mean, El?", Mike wondered, when the words she'd just mumbled were starting to sink in. Who was making rules for her? Her parents? The people who were hiding her?

„I'm not allowed to leave, remember?", she asked. „But... The purge is for breaking rules. I wanted to see you."

Mike couldn't stop it, he reached for her hand, right then. She flinched for a second, before quickly returning the gesture and holding on to him.

„I really wish there were no rules, El. That I could see you all the time.", he told her, knowing how greedy that probably sounded, but he didn't mind. Now, that she was finally here, and that he could finally see her for the first time, Mike wanted nothing more than to have met her even sooner, for real. And to go to school with her, and to finally tell the party about her. Mike felt so much for her, and he was almost sure that El felt some of the same things, too. Well, maybe she did not feel *all* of those feelings like he did, because that must be impossible, but she'd just risked her life to search for him, and that must mean something, right?

Of course, she might only want to be friends with Mike. And while that wasn't all he felt for her, it would be so much better than nothing, still. Mike knew that whoever she lived with was protecting her from something, that something terrible and dark had happened to her, at one point, and that that's why she wasn't in school with him and the others, like a normal kid... But sometimes Mike felt so angry at that faceless, unknown guardian of hers, who kept El away from the world and Mike.

Wordlessly, but with lips that wobbled slightly in the most heartbreaking way, El suddenly slid to the floor, right in front of Mike. He gasped at the sudden proximity between them, and could feel his face heat up again. But he couldn't move away, couldn't even look away for a second, not look at anything but her beautiful face. It was almost insane that he'd never met her before, because, really, Mike could have sworn that her face was already ingrained in his mind, somehow. Into his very being, and intermingled with all he longed for.

„Don't worry, Mike.“, she told him, barely above a whisper, and the gold specks in her eyes were mesmerizing. „If you want, I'll meet you again.“

„How?“, he breathed, eyes jumping from her eyes to her lips and back, at least a dozen times. If he just leaned in right now... Her knees were already almost touching his shin, with the way they sat there. All it would take for Mike to kiss her was one small movement, one tiny gesture, and he'd be there...

She smiled, even though the look in her eyes was uncertain. „I... I don't know.“

Mike felt a sense of determination take over. He had to see her again, he had to. „Can you tell me where you're hiding, El? Where you're always at, when we talk through the walkie?“

Mike saw El's expression change to something close to fear... But she seemed excited, too, somehow, as if the prospect of being reunited with Mike was making her somewhat giddy, as well.

She leaned in, her eyes wide and full of trust, and for a strange, crazy

second, Mike just sat there, his mouth slightly opened, wondering whether she was going to kiss him or not... Instead, she leaned towards his side, her lips centimeters away from the shell of Mike's ear, and cautiously, she whispered: „There's a cabin."

He frowned, his mind still half-dizzy from how close she'd just come to his skin, his neck still tingling from feeling her warm breath... „A cabin? What, you mean, in the forest?"

She nodded, eyeing him again intently. „Don't tell people.", she pleaded, and of course he wouldn't. If El had just started to trust him enough to let him visit her, Mike surely wouldn't get her in any sort of trouble by breaking her trust. No matter how loyal all his friends were. El probably had her reasons...

„Where can I find that cabin?", he asked, quietly. She leaned in again, speaking close to his ear. Mike could feel every single root of his black hair tingle from her voice, her closeness.

„Behind ... Kerley street? Keep walking and you'll see it..."

„Kerley street... That's not that far from my friend Will's house actually!", Mike realized, beaming. „That's where you live?"

El shook her head, vaguely. „It's... deep in the woods.", she mumbled, eyeing him intently, once more. „Mike?"

„Yeah?", he asked, feeling kind of breathless at her intense stare.

„There's a trip wire.", she slowly added, looking slightly scared again.

Mike gulped, but quickly gave her a smile. „That's... that's okay, El. That won't stop me."

The small tug at her lips made his heart beat quicken, her eyes so trusting and warm in front of his. He needed to kiss her, right? God, he had too. It was like his skin would fall off if he didn't, or something. She was everything he thought she would be, and more... And how often had he imagined her close to him like that, how often had he wondered what it would be like to touch her, hold her? How often had he been scared that she wasn't even real, in the first place?

„El?", he stuttered, unable to stop himself, „Can I- uhm, ..-"

A loud noise from outside made both teenagers jump slightly, staring out through the dark window. It had sounded like a loud crack, a tree branch, maybe... Or maybe something entirely else.

„What was that?", Mike hissed, more to himself than to El, and he stood up to gaze out at the lawn. He could barely make anything out, the rain that had picked up a couple minutes ago washed through the darkness and made everything even more blurry.

It was probably nothing. There was probably no one out there, to get them, to get in. They were safe, weren't they?

Just, as Mike was about to turn around and tell El about how she didn't need to worry, and about how it had probably meant nothing, whatever they'd heard... Mike heard a second, strange noise.

Only this time, it didn't come from the garden at all. It came from the other side of the room, and it sounded as if someone had turned the lock on his doorhandle.

Mike turned around, expecting El to stand there and to be the cause of this sound,- that she must have unlocked the door, for whatever reason. But she still sat on her spot on the floor, not having moved an inch.

„Okay, what the hell...", Mike mumbled, barely hearing his own voice over the sound of the rain outside, „How did that..."

Mike went over to the door, examining the lock... And yes, someone must have unlocked it. He frowned, and turned it again, locking the door once again in the process.

Just to find it unlocked again, a second later. Was there someone outside the door, or something?

„Mike.", he heard her mutter, right then, and quickly turned back around to El. He eyed her, curious and confused, and he could have sworn that the tiny drop of blood on the collar of her sweatshirt hadn't been there, a second earlier.

„Hey, your nose is bleeding.", he whispered, stepping closer to her again and dropping back down to the floor, in front of her. He gripped the hem of his own shirt sleeve between his fingers, gently wiping the blood away, almost out of instinct. „Everything okay, El?"

She nodded, staring at him as if she wanted to say something important, any second. Mike felt slightly uneasy again, watching the door he'd just examined. „El, do you think someone's here?", he asked her, uncertainly.

„No Mike. Not anymore.", she replied, so softly that he almost wouldn't have heard it.

He frowned, a little alarmed and confused. „What? What does that mean, not anymore, El?"

„Someone tried to get in. I stopped them."

„You... you mean, earlier?", Mike asked, his eyebrows shooting up in disbelief. „When you came here?"

She shook her head. „Now."

She reached for his hand, then, carefully eyeing him. „Mike... I... I'm not like you."

„El, what are you talking about? What's going on?"

She looked down, seeming to brace herself against an invisible problem, before looking across his room, as if she was searching for something.

„I can... do things, Mike.", she explained, barely above a whisper, and completely gobsmacked, Mike watched as his old model of the Millennium Falcon raised itself from his shelf, flying over to them all by itself. The toy literally flew through the room, in a quick, deliberate bow that Mike's brain couldn't process at all, at first.

It was crazy. Completely, totally crazy.

And *El* had done that! She had to have done it. She wasn't lying, there was no way she could have tricked him, and yet... It was crazy

that she could do that, apparently. She was like Yoda!

„Someone was outside, Mike. When we heard the noise... I broke their arm."

„What, you mean, just now?", he stuttered, still confounded by all that had happened, within the last half hour, and the last couple minutes. „El... you're... you're..-"

He didn't have a proper word for it, but he knew that what she'd just done,- and what she'd just told him about, - was far stranger than anything else he'd so far learned about her. She could move things with her mind. She could hurt people with her mind, protect people with her mind? ...

Really? Yes, of course she could. That's why she was hiding, that's why she said she was different, wasn't it?

She was so inhumanly awesome, and she spend her nights talking to him, listening to him. That was maybe the weirdest thing of them all.

And now she looked... scared? Scared of how he'd react to all of this?

Mike had so many more questions left in his mind, and about a million things he still wanted to know...

But most importantly, he wanted her close right then. Wanted to finally find out what it would be like to kiss her, El, the wonder-girl, the mystery girl, his very best friend, his coolest secret.

So he did.

He just leaned in and hoped that she would be okay with him closing the gap, desperately hoping she wanted him to.

Her tiny gasp was soft against his lips. His breath was warm on hers. And when she slung her arms around Mike's neck, fingernails softly scraping his shirt, Mike really didn't want to ever leave this room again until the next purge night would begin.

(The end)